

I do wish to explain to my colleagues why I issued a statement earlier this week expressing my loss of confidence in Chief Womack's leadership of the LPD. Last week's shocking incident involving one of our sworn officers being arrested for sexual battery and the response to calls from the alleged victim and others reporting the officer's actions led me to conclude that we have a crisis of leadership in that department – a crisis that Chief Womack cannot control.

I have supported the chief throughout the past 8 months, recognizing that many of the problems she faced were not of her own making. I applauded her in the successful re-accreditation of the department. But I've also been very attentive to how she has handled this as a leader, asking the questions – are her people listening to her? Is the culture over there changing? What message is she sending to her department? Three recent incidents have convinced me this is not the case.

First was the Lt Lehman case. The officer in charge of internal affairs is charged by the state attorney with coaching another officer on how to illegally alter court documents. Pretty serious stuff – it remains under investigation and I hope the lieutenant is exonerated; but while the investigation is being conducted the chief assigns Lt. Lehman to train new police officers. A high ranking officer is accused of serious violations, and he is placed in a leadership role at our training academy? What message does that send to the department?

The second incident involved the infamous bra shaking search resulting in a video that went viral; we were advised not to discuss it because of the ongoing investigation, which was completed a week or so ago. A press release comes through my e-mail stating that the search was not illegal and the officer, for not turning the audio on of his camera, is being punished with one day unpaid administrative leave. Something does not compute here – was the officer conducting a search properly or not? Was he following department procedures? Will the next officer who stops a female driver be excused if he follows the same procedure? What message is being sent to the department?

But last week's incident pushed me to this point. Obviously the officer now in jail had not gotten the message, but more important, neither had an operator in our call center or a sergeant assigned to investigate the allegation. When I listened to the 9-1-1 tape and read the transcripts I thought to myself, these people are not getting the message. We have a police department under siege from all sides and an allegation from a citizen about officer inappropriate behavior of this magnitude is so cavalierly handled?

But why not wait until the Police Advisory Committee completes its study and then decide? Because the issue is not about putting in place proper policies and procedures – it is about leadership. We need someone in charge who will demand change, who will tolerate no wavering, who will crack the whip so loudly that everyone in that department will get in line – or face immediate consequences. Perhaps Chief Womack is trying but in my view it's not working. Last week, we learned of a citizen who has allegedly been sexually battered by one of our sworn officers. I was compelled to make a statement because I fear what may happen next. We cannot wait three weeks.

Finally, I am only one person on this commission, and I am speaking as one man who has reached a conclusion that the Chief will not be able to right the ship. I respect that my colleagues may feel differently; and I could be wrong. If the chief is kept on and the department rises to the level of professionalism our citizens deserve, I will be the first to step forward and say that I was wrong. If the vote of this commission is to continue support of the chief, I will respect the decision and do everything I can to support it as we go forward.

But I don't think I am wrong in my assessment and I urge the commission to vote to tell the city manager that, as a body, we have lost confidence in Chief Womack's leadership of the Lakeland Police Department.